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Donations keep anti-Sandinista faction fighting

Knight News Service

San Jose, Costa Rica — Mysterious donations believed to have come from the CIA have turned a ragtag band of 300 anti-Sandinista guerrillas into a reported 3,000-man fighting force with pretensions that it will control half of Nicaragua by December.

The goals of the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (ARDE), a Costa Rican-based coalition of liberal politicians, one-time Sandinistas, Miskito Indians and Nicaraguan blacks, appear farfetched, however.

Against a Sandinista army of 25,000 and a Nicaraguan militia of at least 50,000, even the other anti-Sandinista group, the 8,000-man Democratic Revolutionary Force (FDN), has had its troubles.

The FDN is also financed by the Central Intelligence Agency and backed by the Honduran government.

ARDE believes, however, that it has an ace in the hole — Eden Pastora, a charismatic hero of the 1979 Sandinista revolution and now an bitter critic of its Marxist politics.

Mr. Pastora, who jokingly calls himself "Comandante Kodak," announced earlier this week that he would soon tour the United States — as much to raise funds as to dog the steps of Sandinista leader Tomas Borge, who also has a U.S. swing planned.

To hear Alfonso Robelo, former Sandinista junta member and now ARDE's political chief, however, Mr. Pastora hardly needs the money.

Mr. Robelo said in a recent interview that ARDE had only 300 fighters when Mr. Pastora launched his war last May 1. He said that it now has 3,000 rebels and will arm and train 2,000 to 5,000 more in the next two months.

Mr. Robelo said ARDE's turnaround since June — when Mr. Pastora announced he was quitting because his army's treasury was down to \$3,000 — was the result of increased donations from individuals in Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and some European countries as well as "private American organizations and some Jewish groups."

He also acknowledged receipt of arms shipments and "five or six" donations "in the tens of thousands of dollars" from "mysterious" donors.

"We have great suspicions about who they are, but we don't want to say because we want to continue receiving money," Mr. Robelo said.

Asked if he believed the money came from the CIA — which the leftist Mr. Pastora has criticized almost as much as the Sandinistas — Mr. Robelo smiled and said, "I have my suspicions."

ARDE rebels now operate with relative ease, he said, in a largely uninhabited jungle in southern Nicaragua tucked between the Atlantic coast, Lake Nicaragua and the Costa Rican border.

ARDE's next move, Mr. Robelo said, will be to push northward and by December link up with Miskito guerrillas who are allied with the rival FDN and are moving south from Honduras.

An ARDE military commander said control of the eastern half of Nicaragua would isolate the Caribbean port of Bluefields, often used by Cuban and Soviet ships that he said are delivering military aid to Nicaragua.

ARDE guerrillas would later wheel westward, Mr. Robelo said, and move into the central highlands and Pacific flatlands that hold 80 percent of Nicaragua's 2.7 million people and virtually of all its industrial, business and agricultural wealth.

While ARDE and its war plans appear farfetched, one former U.S. Special Forces member who has traveled with its fighters said they appeared "pretty professional."

"ARDE is in pretty good shape," said a Western diplomatic source who tracks its progress. "It is isolated, but it has grown and has the potential to become a serious threat."

ARDE claimed credit for a Thursday air attack on an airfield at Managua.

Mr. Robelo denied published reports that ARDE would soon join forces with the FDN, which is led largely by former members of the Nicaraguan National Guard, which defended dictator Anastasio Somoza in the 1979 revolution that overthrew him.

"The FDN high command is 100 percent Guard, and until they change, there is no hope," Mr. Robelo said.

He claimed that 60 percent to 65 percent of ARDE's fighters are former Sandinista guerrillas or sympathizers who fought against the National Guard.

"We are not counterrevolutionaries," he said. "We are rescuers of a betrayed revolution."

ARDE's key problem appears to be the Costa Rican government's refusal to cooperate with the guerrillas, although it has allowed ARDE to carry on political activities.

"Our people often spend as much time avoiding the Costa Rican authorities as they do fighting the Sandinistas," said Brooklyn Rivera, political leader of ARDE's 600 Miskito guerrillas.

"They can shout, but they can't shoot," said Armando Vargas, Costa Rica's minister of information. Mr. Vargas noted that the government recently fired three police officials who cooperated with ARDE guerrillas, confiscated a rebel gunrunning helicopter and arrested 28 guerrillas, who were later deported, mostly to Panama.

Mr. Rivera also complained that, while his Miskito guerrillas are fighting well, they are ill-equipped and have to be resupplied by sea. Small dugout canoes carrying supplies take 24 hours to make the 250-mile trip from Costa Rica's northeastern corner to isolated beaches along Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, he said.

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